ASIFA EAST

The International Animated Film Society

ANIMATOR

April 2002 Issue

STEP RIGHT THIS WAY!
SEE THE TALKING ANIMALS! WONDERFUL WORLDS OF IMAGINATION! STRONG WOMEN & BEAUTIFUL MEN! AMAZING FREAKS OF NATURE! ADVENTURE! PATHOS! ROMANCE! FLATULENCE!
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ASIFA EAST
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THE GREAT 33RD ASIFA EAST ANIMATION FESTIVAL!

SUNDAY, MAY 5TH 2002 6:00PM

CO-SPONSORED BY THE NEW SCHOOL

@THE TISHMAN AUDITORIUM 66 W12TH ST.

Featured inside...

*An Interview with **John R. Dilworth**

*Articles by **Michael Sporn** and **Masako Kanayama**

*And event info for The Statement Screening, The Making Of Ice Age,

&

Emily Hubley

ASIFA East

The International Animated Film Society Northeast /New York Chapter

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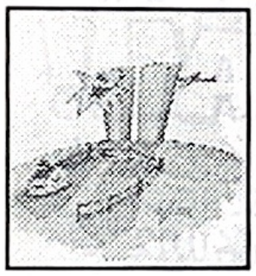

The Statement Screening

SVA 209 East 23rd Street
Room 502
7 PM
Tuesday, April 23

In response to the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, we at ASIFA-East proposed that animators contribute a short (30 seconds to one minute) film presenting their own statement or thoughts on the recent events. [As the NY chapter, in a sense, it is our responsibility to reflect on film our feelings about what has happened.]

Join us and the filmmakers on April 23, as we screen and discuss our films.

FREE LIFE DRAWING CLASSES

For ASIFA-East members and students at SVA 141 W. 21st St. Room 603 C From 7:00-10:00PM on Thursday nights

Any questions?
Contact Toni Tysen
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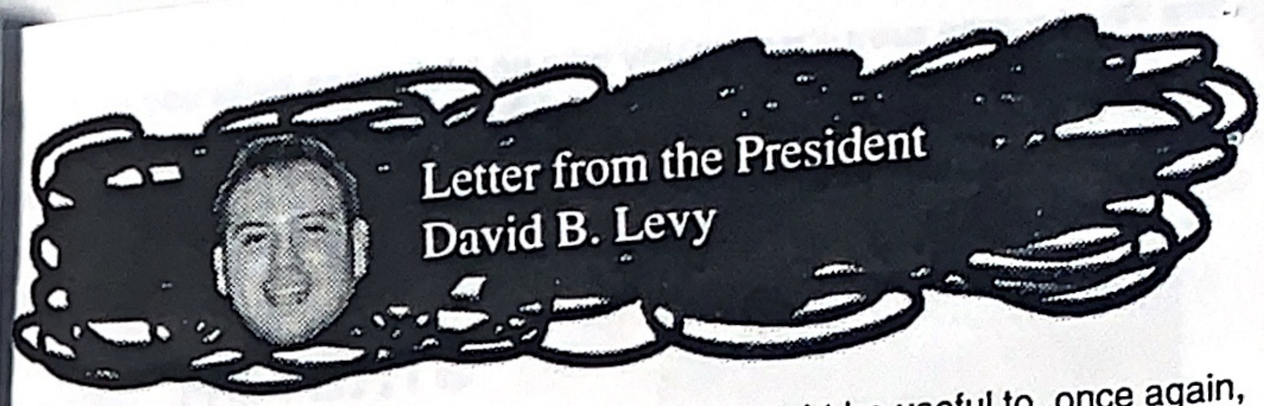


Howdy! For my column this month, I thought it might be useful to, once again, spread a little information. Here are some of the most commonly asked questions in regards to the festival:

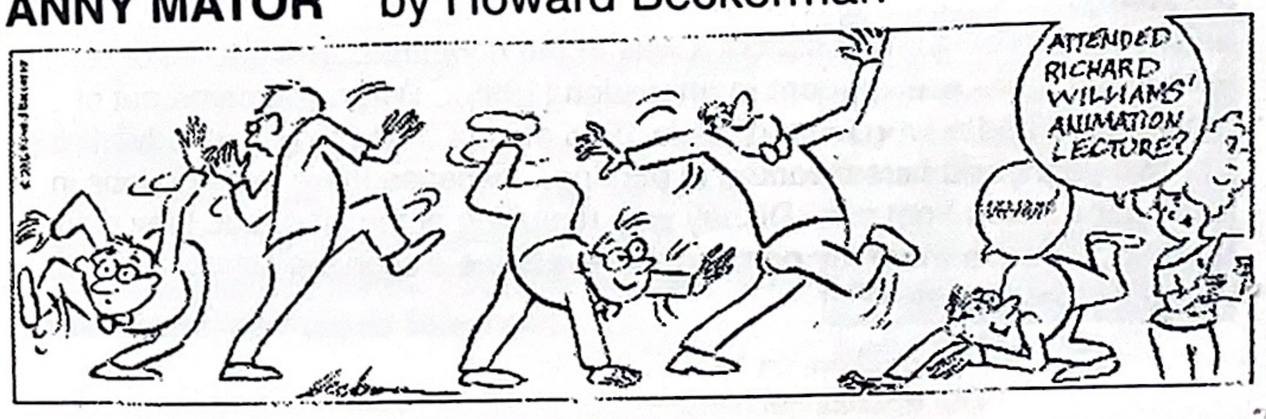
Do you pre-screen the tapes before the judgings?
No. At the Asifa judgings, all of us are seeing the films for the first time (unless of course its your film). The voting audience is the only jury and selection process we have. Don't you feel even more special now?

Why can't I enter my film on film?
Actually, its been years since many have asked this. The last year we accepted film entries was 1996. In that year we only had one entry come in on film. In all the festivals since then, we have had virtually no inquiries from filmmakers wishing to submit their entries on film. The people have spoken.

Who tallies the ballots from the judging?
Ballots are counted by an independent accountant, John Schnall's cousin (kidding). The films with the highest scores win the prizes in each category.

Why are there no events or newsletters in July & August?
...Because we're human. Also, the summer months are really about the great outdoors! It's like we're doing you a favor....stay out of dark stuffy rooms. In short, events in the summer would be lightly attended. Most of all, we could really use the break. We'll be back in September. We promise!

ANNY MATOR by Howard Beckerman



??? and AAA

STRETCH ALONG WITH JOHN

A Q & A Interview with *Courage the Cowardly Dog* creator, John R. Dilworth
- by David B. Levy

An Oscar Nomination. One hundred and four eleven minute Courage The Cowardly Dog cartoons for the Cartoon Network. Numerous pilots for MTV Animation and Nickelodeon. Six (and counting) independent animated films. Yes, I'm talking about multi award winning animator/ designer/ writer/ director/ producer/ creator/ founder and president of Stretch Films, John R. Dilworth! John generously took a few hours time out to talk to us about all the above. Enjoy!

DL: Was there a key film in your childhood that pushed you towards a future in animation?
JRD: So many things contribute to who we are as a person...I can't just narrow it and say "oh, I saw Steam Boat Willie"...though, they should have kept making those little rat movies...they were fabulous..that guy was nasty...he would abuse animals but, at the same time he was cowering under that huge guy." There was a moment. I was looking at an illustration I made and I wanted to see it move. That was it.

DL: Can you describe what the industry was like in NY when you started in 1985?
JRD: When you went to school it was at the right time...you got out of school just when there was a boom in animation (1995). When you came out of school you had a job! Most of us in 1985 did not. I had to go into advertising for two years and I also worked in printing....because there were no jobs in animation when I got out. Disney was recruiting at the time..but, they didn't take me. I gave them my portfolio like everyone else in the school..but, I'm not a Disney artist.

DL: Can you shed some light on why you've made your career in NY and not somewhere else, like LA for instance?
JRD: : I need this city. Its a cynical place. Its a skeptical place....I guess I'm tuned into that. Of course I've had my love affairs with LA. I've always gone there with short films and done post. The thing I don't like is you need a car out there. You need a car! Think about Richard Williams, he's walking down the street! You look at characters! They way they walk...everyday you're looking at people.

DL: Is this 'observation stuff' something you can turn off or is it always going?
JRD: I can't shut if off. You'd really have to be in an emotional state to miss it. You know when you're so distracted...you're looking down and you're just moving forward. You just want to get home. I get down. Those are the moments I can't look. I can't observe. The funny thing is that we record everything...then we can use it again.

DL: What were your work experiences before founding stretch films?
JRD: I interned with Howard Beckerman. Howard is a generous man. I was always working through school...working for whatever producer for 10 or 15 dollars an hour. Its amassing experience. I was painting cells with Janet Scagnelli at Chelsea Animation...which was fabulous. That doesn't even exist anymore. It was two guys in this whole studio full of women. All painting cells with gloves on their hands.
At this time I was mostly assisting. I helped Janet to finish a job she was doing with doing with an animator who had passed away...and I filled in and helped finish the commercial. You learned right there. Responsibility and production and delivering deadlines and finding ways to get things done. All your limitations come out at the same time. Then I got to animate with Michael Sporn. I'm kind of indebted to Steven Dovas, I think he encouraged me to go to Michael's. I fell in love with Michael's whole process. His style, the looseness of it...the stories. Michael's ability to find unconventional ways to communicate through animation. I was able to work on several films for Michael. Everything else happens...you get out more, you go to festivals..you talk to people, and slowly you get more jobs. You went to studios and showed them your work...you mostly got rejected..or there wasn't any work for you and you just kept going. We used to do all-nighters...those things seem to be prerequisites for developing in Animation. I remember (MTV's) Liquid Television being a good thing to do at the time. MTV gave me two opportunities, "Smart Talk With Raisin" and "Angry Cabaret". "Smart Talk With Raisin" was for Liquid Television...that was their last season. It was supposed to be a two-parter. I did the first part, but then MTV cancelled Liquid Television.

Catch of the Day (2000)

DL: So, "Smart Talk With Raisin" was a pilot?
JRD: I don't know if it was a pilot, but that's interesting. All these shorts were used as pilots! But, you weren't aware of it. You were just doing shorts. You were never told you were doing pilots. It's naive of the filmmaker to think "no but, you were never told that. You were just given a small amount to produce it. "Smart Talk With Raisin" was done with Colossal pictures in San Francisc Angry Cabaret... I don't know if that worked really well.

DL: Was "Angry Cabaret" a vehicle to wrap music videos around, like Beavis and Butthead?
JRD: Of course! They already had the Beavis and Butthead experience. They had covered the music videos. I thought, we can do other things like show live action footage in a certain strange montage and just have music over that. But different kinds of music. We had a video DJ. MTV found a fantastic video editor. Ultimately I didn't want to do the series because they wanted me to do it there (at MTV's studio). Which means I would be an employee. That, I couldn't deal with, so it was a deal-breaker...and that was that. There was Nickelodeon as well...I met Linda (Simensky) there. They d beautiful things. I had a pilot there.

DL: Sniz & Fondu?
JRD: Then it was called "Psyched For Snuppa"....Masako Kanayama worke on it. They wanted me to do that too. I couldn't do that. I wasn't at all attracted to working with the creator..it was just too much. Mo (Willems) got chance. I don't know what happened. Then they did those little shorts on Kablam! The one thing that always helped me out was my own conviction that I enjoyed making my own films. So throughout all of that, I was always making a film.

DL: Were these films like expensive business cards for you?
JRD: I just needed to do them.. I also wanted to be famous. I fell in love with the independent filmmakers from the 70s and the 80s. I really believed in the art. I believed that animation was a special vehicle in which to communicate ideas...and I still do. You make films to learn how to make films. I don't know how to do them still! (laughs). When you're making a film, you're not deliberately saying this is what I'm going to explore. There are serious symbols {the plane in Noodles and Ned} is about freedom and being able to overcome something. Its very much like live action, nothing is by accident. You have a very active role in what your doing. The problem in my animation is that it is too much attached to my own life. Of my commercial work, the only thing that I can say that is close to my life in a personal way is my Courage series. In Courage I was able to explore a lot of themes....and we did it so rapidly! How many short films can you make? What an opportunity. Most of my films are semi-autobiographical. My films tend to be about human feelings.

DL: What about something like Dirdy Birdy, which on the surface, appears more like slapstick?
JRD: The surface. That film was about 'why do we get into relationships that are so dysfunctional'? Why are we attracted to things that are harmful to us?

DL: It was functional for the Birdy.
JRD: Isn't that a sad story of people that need to feel love even through abuse or harsh behavior? (laughs) Its the only way they know that they're loved. Cartoons are perfect vehicles to express these things.

DL: Coyote and Roadrunner.
JRD: Were they in love with each other?

DL: What would either of them have done without the other?
JRD: I know what you mean. Dirdy Birdy really fell in love with this cat. It turned out to be a co-dependent situation. They found something in common, you see? And what happens?...the Birdy fucks it up! Then the whole things starts again! Its a repetitive damaging cycle..anyway, it was funny.

DL: How would you define humor? What makes something funny in a cartoon?
JRD: That's a funny question. I like that question. I don't know what makes people laugh. I think I just do it subconsciously. You have to have some self control. You can't just put anything in. I also do things and show people. You can give 3 different people the same thing and you'll get 3 different opinions...but, something about a certain opinion will ring true to you and I don't know why, but, you'll explore that. Animation is such a collaborative thing...even if you do it yourself you're still working with some sound man, a camera man..and some assistant and you can't help but become influenced.

DL: Courage, for the most part, is a non-verbal character. Was there any concerns with this limiting Courage's role as a lead character?
JRD: In the original short, "The Chicken From Outer Space", the dog didn't speak at all. In fact, nobody spoke. In the series, I wanted to have the dog talk...and we tried it. If you see the first half of Season one, Courage does a lot more talking then in the whole series and it really was the Cartoon Network that encouraged me not to have the dog talk. We limited his talking to screams, babbling and whines...and it works. That was a great call. I couldn't help but agree that it was better. These are no ordinary executives, at Cartoon Network. You know, I worked with some executives that don't have a clue. These are sharp characters...they believe in the art, the cartoons. Linda (Simensky), Mike (Lazzo) & Jay (Bastian)...we're very lucky.

DL: You've had Armies of Eggplant, Handsome Duck Gods, Twisted hair-cutting relatives...
JRD: Eggplants were about accepting people that are different from you. (laughs). We get absurd, but the idea was there. Remember in the end? They all got along! It was team work. They all benefited.

DL: What about Freaky Fred?
JRD: We just invented that. I was talking to my head writer and he was telling me that he loved poetry. He loved writing it. Rhyme. I said, ok, why don't we do a story where the whole thing takes place in rhyme? That created this freaky barber. That's one of my favorite shows, Dave. You're just quoting old season one shows! You know Barbara Jean (Kearney) right? Well...she's Barbara, Freaky Fred's lover, you know when he goes back and he shaves all her head. You see the Dirdy Birdy with those monster faces? That's me! I'm the farmer. Why do you think that character's so easy? I'm that cruel, bitter resentful man. (laughs) You know what? There's a real Muriel in Scotland. She's slightly modeled after that woman and a little bit after a friend of mine.

DL: Do you do any voices on Courage?
JRD: Of course I do. I'm in every show. Marty does the dog. We had a difficult time casting that role. I think we spent six months trying to cast him. Marty's eyebrows go up like Courage's'. He was so cuddly and fuzzy....he got it. He could do those screams!

DL: You write most of the shows, correct?
JRD: I would say, yeah. 90% start with me and then we work with the team. It's an unusual way to work because some don't physically write. They sit with us and we write verbally. Our head writer, David Steven Cohen, assembles it all from the meetings.

DL: The backgrounds on Courage are among its most attractive features. They really set it apart from any other cartoons on television. How did the semi photo realistic and highly textured BG style evolve from the simpler water color BGs of the pilot?
JRD: It's like that in the pilot too. It just evolved. Its the same soft ware. Painter and Photoshop. Is painter still used? What happened to it? Margaret Frey did all the BGs on the pilot. It just took off. After season one we just kept building on it...it was a natural evolution. That department has fulfilled all of my desires...its one of my favorite departments to spend time in. The color, backgrounds and props... We can't really get the dimension I'm looking for...It's like CGI but, there is something about CGI that I can't except. I'm exploring that now. Now I'm doing my first CGI independent film. I am trying to get a sense of how my influence on the media could work or how I could express myself. Physically I can't do it. I have to rely on artists that do it. It's a whole other way of working. For the backgrounds on Courage I wanted to create a real sense of time. Dramatic lighting (laughs).

DL: What is the most enjoyable and rewarding part of the showmaking process for you?
JRD: We've been very lucky on Courage. We've mixed medias. We did one episode with CGI. A big experiment. Courage goes through a computer and he turns into a CGI Courage. He went through a portal, he can change...it's that looking glass. That was great fun and the Network just went with it.

DL: Do you do any of the animation on Courage at your studio?
JRD: We did walks...for all the main characters and maybe 30% of the rest.

DL: How did your rich background working for others effect the way you set up your studio?
JRD: I don't know...I just did whatever felt natural. I'm not a business man. We deliver our shows, they look great, the clients are happy and we have a great relationship with our client. You have to be comfortable. You're a servant to the schedule when doing a series.

DL: Is the business hat something you wear for a certain amount of time each day?
JRD: You don't ever take it off.

DL: Is that a role you wanted to end up in?
JRD: I don't think you ever know until its on top of you...and then you swim. You just keep swimming. The biggest crisis you encounter is 'what's your next project?' or 'how many artists are you going to have to lay off?'

DL: What, if anything, on air now do you consider your competition?
JRD: I like SpongeBob. It happens sort of naturally.

Courage the Cowardly Dog

DL: Did the Oscar Nomination for "The Chicken From Outerspace" (1996) open any doors for you?
JRD: That was a hundred years ago.

DL: Nominations don't expire.
JRD: You should talk to Nick Park. He's got three...if he gets one more he ca
put up a table. In 1996 we had the greatest year. We went all over the place
We met with everybody. The nomination lets you make appointments to see
people at Amblin, WB.. whether or not they are going to green light any
projects is another thing all together. But, you go with it...and I wore my spac
suit to every meeting! With my silver boots! It's great fun...you're in La La
Land! Ha! Ha! We didn't get any money. Eventually we knew we were goir
to do Courage. We just didn't want to do it with Hannah & Barbera. We
waited for them to close. You knew something was happening. It took two
years...
We did a series for CTW and CN called Ace & Avery. It was for young
audiences. Three and under..some crazy thing, right? I'd never done that
before. Noodles and Ned were wanted for this series, but I would have had
give up the rights to the characters...and I couldn't do that...so I created Ace
and Avery for them, because you have to stay in business. Also, it was a
funding thing, it pays for movies. They were experts in child
development...looking at everything like designs, color, story...everything had
to get approved not just by executives but, by specialists....and you couldn't
argue with them. They were the PHDs. They knew about child development
How do we become these politicians where we can just accept and continue
to work this way? Don't you resent it at Nick? Aren't there conflicts? Or do
you just accept that Blue's Clues is a children's program, these are the
parameters in which you need to work...that's the challenge and you do it.

DL: Its no different than someone working on your show (Courage). They all work within parameters and have to support your vision. There is a world and a standard to maintain.
JRD: That's a good point. I can see it...but, we don't have child specialists.
We have different kinds of specialists...you know, that tell us not to make a
character's skin too brown or it might get the attention of somebody who's ski
looks like that. It's alright...why are we being a baby about it? A professional
just does what they're told.

DL: That's the commercial nature of the business. That's why we do independent films outside of that.
JRD: I think it's all ego. We don't like to be told what to do. We don't like to
have our ideas challenged. We want to be able to express ourselves...I think
its all infantilism.

DL: Your films tend to be told with mainly visual storytelling techniques. What can you say about that?
JRD: I just think I'm reticent. I enjoy dialogue. I never feel comfortable doing
it myself. I can express more just through expression..but, I can't say that we
can just do that in an 80 minute picture. That would be something! (laughs)
Would anybody sit through it?

DL: As an animator, how do you avoid the cliche and still make the actions and emotions clear?
JRD: You just THINK, right? You went to the Richard Williams lecture. I have
to tell you, I miss having tutors and mentors. That whole concept of someone
older passing something down, some wisdom, to someone younger.

DL: In Richard Williams' book he says that when animators get older, their timing slows down.
JRD: I'm 39 now...at 28, I wasn't even touching the timing that I think I'm
capable off. But, then...at 33, 34 and 35 I really felt comfortable timing and I
felt comfortable doing the art. I'm not very good at it. It's good that I believe
so much in the individual way of drawing. No one should draw like
Rembrandt. You draw your way...that is the best way ever. But, timing?
When do you start seeing the world slower? Did The Mousochist seem slow
to you?

DL: No.
JRD: No. So I don't know when It slows down. Maybe at 60, maybe at 70?
Right? But, we don't know... I'm only now getting through the Richard
Williams book...and its been a long time since I've sought out a book of such
use.

DL: What was your animation book when you were starting out?
JRD: I think the book that had the most influence would be Frank Thomas and
Ollie Johnston's "The Illusion Of Life".

DL: How does your work style on your independent work differ from the way you work on Courage...or is it different?
JRD: On independent films you give yourself a deadline...it could be flexible to
some degree but, if you don't give yourself a deadline you could work forever
on something...

DL: Or never start it.
JRD: Or never start it. Good point. But its hard to finish. You can start
something, but how do you keep going? That's one thing I'm proud of. I can
do that.

DL: Are there any plans to put a collection of John Dilworth shorts together for home video?

JRD: I don't know. I don't think I have that many that I actually own. I did a lo that were financed by others...Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network. I also have a few that are unwatchable. They would just be under the category of early work, immature work. And then.....mature work, QUESTION MARK.

DL: Is there any larger metaphorical or personal meaning behind your new film, "The Mousochist"?

JRD: It was about being a jurist at Annecy (2001) and how repulsive I found the whole experience. We had some members that were very acrimonious to the films...and I felt that it wasn't a celebration of creation, but a celebration of who could defeat the next person. Individuals intended to destroy someone's work. I was opposed to that. I realize we're in a society where competition is vital...its the only real way discern between great art or meaningful art and mediocrity...and would we ever get a Michelangelo if he wasn't a competitive soul? But.... I'm opposed to this idea of competition is all we should live for..(who is better than the next person). It (The Mousochist) came at certain crossroads...falling in love with this false illusion of being a jurist in a festival that was going to celebrate art and creativity and find the good things in these films...giving everyone an opportunity to have their work be seen...and doing the series. Its also about personal relationships. For me its, "you went after the things that you could, that you desired" and there you are...you can have it.. But, the thing is you lose your head! I mean...why do you go after these things that you know will harm you?!! Its naive.

DL: The Mouse in "The Mousochist" may appear to be ignoring the cheese by reading a newspaper or exercising...but, its really on his mind the whole time.

JRD: Right. But, also its about going against his nature. I mean, how could he avoid the cheese? If there's something you desire its going to be pretty hard to walk away from it. Why do we do the things that at least on some level we know its going to bring us harm? In the end, he got his cheese. Psychologically, its fulfilling. But, how do you get out of it? I doubt he'll ever attach his body again...and even if he does, is he going to be the same mouse? I don't think I executed the picture well enough. I'm not certain that people know that the mouse knows that the cheese is attached to a mouse trap. I've failed in that regard.

The Mousochist, we did, in an island in Croatia on the Adriatic Sea. I was there and no one spoke English. I was staying at this beautiful place but, I wasn't talking to anyone and no one could talk to me. Between breakfast and lunch I would animate and then after lunch when everyone else was taking a siesta I would do it again and then go to the beach. It was just fabulous. It just worked out. The drawings are this big (gestures a 6 field). *John pulls out a box of index card size drawings from The Mousochist. Including the mini BG.*

DL: Did you corner register all the drawings?

JRD: Yeah, that's what I did. J. Stuart Blackton. The drawings are just shy of a 6 field. I had this metal straight edge that I held the drawings against. By the second week, I could flip five of these drawings! Talk about needing to draw and...making something. I actually feel pretty comfortable doing little tiny drawings.

DL: What other creative endeavors do you have going on that people know least about?

JRD: Don't you feel that our lives should be creative in everything we do? As best that we can do? I mean, do I knit, do I cook...yeah I do those things. I transplant trees. I sculpt. I paint. You do what you can. But, I don't know what else I'd be doing if there wasn't animation. Being in the service of other human beings would be a high thing for me. If I couldn't draw anymore, I'd be in some humanitarian field.

DL: What is the next big challenge for you? Any interest in working in feature films?

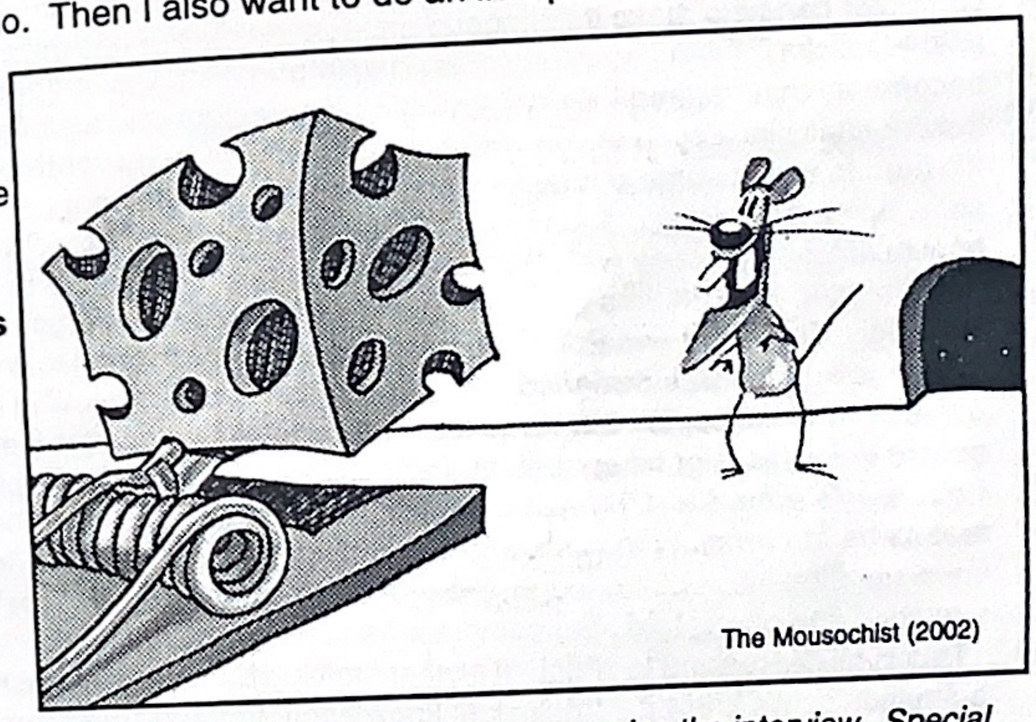
JRD: There's many things. I want to do this short CGI film. I'm also going to work on a new short film, something more substantial. We're waiting to hear word on a new pilot for Cartoon Network. I'd like to start development on a Courage feature. But, we'll see, I have to go down and start meeting with people....now that Power Puffs has come around. Courage would look fantastic as a feature, visually. I have a story. I just have to get the momentum. Courage is winding down now. By August or end of July we deliver our last show. Then I can focus more on the pilot and the feature. It's what I'd love to do. Then I also want to do an independent feature.

DL: A la Bill Plympton?

JRD: God! Is he not our hero?

DL: What does the "R" stand for in John R. Dilworth?

JRD: Rumplestilskin, Raamses, Reticent.



The Mousochist (2002)

Many thanks to Jessica Madri, from Stretch Films, for arranging the interview. Special thanks to John R. Dilworth for allowing us an enlightening look at his creative process.

VIEW POINT

Out the Window: In A Flash

by Michael Sporn

The recent success of a number of cgi animated films has led many to believe that days of drawn (i.e. 2D) animation are numbered. This, of course, is nonsense. It's about as real as the certainty during the '50's that 3D films were the future and only those in 3D would be viable. (You'll remember that this led to Jack Warner's closing his animation studio in 1953 – obviously he wasn't aware of the 3D Bugs Bunny cartoon, "Lumber Jack-Rabbit". For about 6 months Chuck Jones went to work for Disney on SLEEPING BEAUTY.) Fortunately, things soon straightened themselves out, and normal, flat films continued to be made. Many of them weren't even filmed Cinemascope, Panavision, Cinerama, Super Techniscope, Vistavision or any of the other inventive formats.

Most of the animated films to be released this year will be 2D. SPIRIT, LILO AND STITCH, TREASURE PLANET, THE POWERPUFF GIRLS are all hand drawn animated films. If they all fail, then we can assume that only cgi will do, and we'll hav to reduce our visions. But for the moment, we have to accept the fact that the 2nd highest grossing animated feature is the hand-drawn LADY AND THE TRAMP II. It sold some 250 million dollars worth of business in the US alone – without being released to theatres. PETER PAN II: RETURN TO NEVERLAND is on it's way to matching that record. These cheap knock-offs are big buck business. They cost _ the price of theatrical features, and, consequently, they return larger profits.

I do have a complaint about computer generated films. The basics of animation see to be out the window. In the thirties and forties, the masters created rules and techniques that are now not trained or ignored because the computer is easier and gives a slick enough image. Forget about exposing, fielding, and drawing; the computer can help make it look good enough. Animation has gotten dreadful. Younge animators don't even know they're lacking information. Computer engineers have become animators, and they're moving the characters with a stolid weightlessness; they're totally lacking in any of the lessons we've learned over the history of animatio It's hard to watch some of these films despite the fact that more and more of them show up on our screens and tv sets. Of the cgi producers, only Pixar seems to know how to animate a scene well. With the possible exception of the donkey, most of the movement in SHREK was horrendous and stiff, and the design of the film was just plain ugly. The script and Eddie Murphy's voice did everything to win it the Oscar.

Flash animation was designed for the internet. Instead of moving characters, shapes move around the screen taking up less memory and making for faster download. But people think this is good enough and are producing films using flash! The animation in Paul Terry's silent AESOP FABLES was better. At least you could see Farmer Alfalfa's feet as he ran away. With flash, all walk cycles are done with one drawing from the waist up! If that isn't bad enough, the drawing is appalling, and most of the stories wretched and poorly told. The computer can't be blamed for that.

This is all depressing to watch. It's what I think will truly represent the end of animation as we know it – the lack of knowledge, and the sheer arrogant ignorance of those rushing to make the buck. I'm not talking about producers or investors, here; I'm talking about animators unschooled and untrained proliferating in masses. The suits will limit the money, but we'll be the ones to kill the medium.

Two bright lights shone this month:

Dick Williams gave an exhilarating talk at the last ASIFA East meeting. He was promoting his book, but he really seems more to be promoting animation. I couldn't help but feel encouraged and recharged after that meeting. And all he did was to talk about the basics – the walk cycle. He gave out so much information in such a short bit of time. (Odd that so few people attended. Barely a classroomful in New York, when LA sold out a large auditorium, and Toronto had some 700 people show up for him.) No one in ASIFA East or West or Central can call themselves an animator without owning a copy of his book.

Bill Plympton has created one of those hand-drawn feature films to be released this month. In his case, the computer didn't even color the cels. (Imagine, an animated film actually using cels!) From the sample shown at the ASIFA judging screening, Bill seems to be still getting audiences to laugh at odd situations. Congratulations to him and his entire crew. Maybe the Academy will recognize an independent THIS year and nominate him for the Feature animation Oscar.

ANNOUNCEMENT

JOHN CANEMAKER MARCHING TO A DIFFERENT TOON (2001)

Now available in stores and online!

For more than two decades John Canemaker has created films that charm, enlighten and touch audiences. His "toons" (which have been featured in everything from "The World According to Garp" to "Pee-wee's Playhouse") are often daring, frequently hilarious and always compassionate. Showcasing Canemaker's wide-ranging talent and emotional resonance, "Marching to a Different Toon" includes his animation classics: the whimsical "Confessions of a Stardreamer", the astonishingly lovely "Bottom's Dream", the clever and witty "Confessions of a Stand-Up", the enchanting "The Wizard's Son", and the wondrously beautiful "Bridgehampton".

As a bonus, this collector's edition also features selections from Canemaker's collaborative work, including "Behind the Scene, The DNA Concerto", early TV spots for Gay Men's Health Crisis, and excerpts from the award-winning documentaries "What Do Children Think of When They Think of the Bomb" and "Break the Silence: Kids Against Child Abuse". These magical and moving films are enduring treasures of animation that will delight viewers for generations to come.

Distributed by MILESTONE film & video.
phone: 800.603.1104
email: MileFilms@aol.com

Chasing Chihiro

by Masako Kanayama

My friends called me crazy. My family was appalled. But people travel for great music, exotic cuisine, or to attend a sport event. So what's the difference? I travel for a masterpiece of animated film.

The name of the film is "Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi (a.k.a. 'Spirited Away')", the latest film that came out of Studio Ghibli. I only saw the trailer in April when I was visiting my family in Tokyo. It looked so colorful, so energetic; I was almost skeptical of the product – is it possible for the Ghibli team to always top themselves? My worry was, however, quickly replaced by a burning desire as I witnessed more promotional materials, then; soon I slipped into a desperate frustration. Because at the time I still didn't know when, or if, I would ever see this film. Thus my quest began.

Since around October last year, I was secretly looking for a perfect weekend to visit Japan. My plan was: leaving on Thursday, arriving there Friday evening, go to a theater on Saturday and flying back to New York on Sunday in time for Monday. It seemed plausible, but with great physical difficulty. At least the price was right, but time was not on my side. More weekends passed, then dreaded Holiday Season rolled in. I was forced to abandon the idea. Fortunately, The Year 2002 brought me luck. While browsing an Asahi Shinbun website in late January, a tiny article caught my eyes: "Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi" was chosen to compete in Berlin Film Festival". ...Berlin...! A light bulb went up in my brain. The rest was easy; it was a matter of arranging the ticket, coordinating with friends there, and begging for time off work on short notice.

The public screening was the evening I arrived. By the time of screening, the huge Royal Palast Theater was packed with an audience in young-ish age range, from early twenties to late thirties - no small children in sight. In fact, I noticed a sign at the box office notifying anyone under 18 cannot be admitted. (Having more than a few unpleasant experiences involving small kids in a theater, it was a welcoming gesture.) It was a responsive audience, showing full respect. No one seemed to complain that the film, two hours and change, was too long. On the contrary, the film just kept going, intriguing us, taking us along the transformation of the girl named Chihiro.

If you are following Ghibli's activities, you know it was going to be a good film. Not a Disney wannabe, not a 'Look-at-the-cool-CGI' movie, but simply a good film that entertains as well as moves you. The story starts almost suddenly, without much explaining. We see a family in the cluttered car: Father is driving, Mother sits on the passenger seat, and a girl lying on the back seat looking extremely sullen. We see her clutching a bouquet of flowers with a card that says: "Take care, Chihiro; we'll see each other again!". Soon the car takes a wrong turn and encounters a dead end, with just a dirt road leading to a mysterious old tunnel. The parents are eager and curious – they want to go in. The girl is not – she just wants to go back, hence establishing her as a reluctant, scared, rather whiny child. An introduction to the characters is made briefly but efficiently so the film does not waste any time. Immediately the audience is drawn to a mysterious world that occupies the Other Side.

While I was preparing for this article, some significant turn of events occurred. First of all, "Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi" was awarded the prestigious Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. Although it ended up sharing the honor with an Irish live-action film, it was the first time for an animated film to receive such a major award in recent memory, especially outside Japan where the film originated. To hear that news was such a thrill to me that day!! Secondly, the nominees for the Oscar's Best Feature Animated Film category were announced. By the time we read this article, we will know the outcome, so I will refrain from making a prediction. However, I would like to touch upon this subject a little deeper. But before I get into that: the biggest news so far is that Disney finally acquired the distribution rights in North America. According to an article, they will look into releasing an English-dubbed version in this coming summer. I am extremely happy to learn this, because the main reason why I chose to write this article was to ask anyone to pitch in the effort for urging Disney (or Dreamworks, for that matter) to let PEOPLE SEE THIS FILM. So I am relieved that at least we are stepping in the right direction.

I cannot, however, help from feeling sinister skepticism creeping in. There will be some bumpy roads ahead because of two reasons:

a) The memory of what happened – or what did NOT happen – to "Princess Mononoke" when it was released in North America a few years ago is still lingering. It was a major reason for hesitation by Disney when weighing the option to distribute. The distributor, Miramax Films, was in full understanding of the nature: it is not a comedy and/or musical, the film is long – more than two hours, and there are violent scenes that many see as unfit to children. To me, the film is equivalent to a Kurosawa film using animation technique. Naturally, the reviews were wildly mixed, from the highest praise to 'giving Pokemon movie a higher grade'. I must note, however, "Princess Mononoke" was treated well in New York. Prior to its public debut, the film was screened at the New York Film Festival with Mr. Miyazaki present, who received a standing ovation. Triumphantly, the film had very promising start: the average box office receipts exceeded $13,000 per screen despite the lack of any major promotion. So the strategy should have been playing in a few choice theaters, but slowly expanding to reach larger audience through words of mouth. Instead it went wider after a few weekends. The amount dropped drastically, and it disappeared.

b) It will be difficult to promote a 2-D animation; especially foreign made, in an era of CGI hype. As Tom Hanks, who led the selection committee of newly established 'Best Feature Animated Film' category admitted, a lot of decision-making people are thinking only CGI 3-D animation can be good animation. It is true, both nominees "Monsters, Inc." and "Shrek" are made in computer generated 3-D environment. However the true reason of becoming a hit was because they were actually well written, well acted (via famous voice) decent films. At the same time, "Waking Life" was overlooked even though the film was fully rendered by computer assisted manner. Lack of bankable talents, studio names, and the look of 2-D may have caused that disappointment. In the meantime, the so-called traditional 2-D films are not getting the fair share of time and resources. I noticed the recent surge of Disney's releasing of the sequels to their classics only for direct-to-video and DVD market. Those films make such a profit; hence the vicious cycle spiraling down continues. And if a good film is made in a traditional technique, it does not receive the support of company, as was evident in the case of "Iron Giant" which, coincidentally, also came out in 1999.

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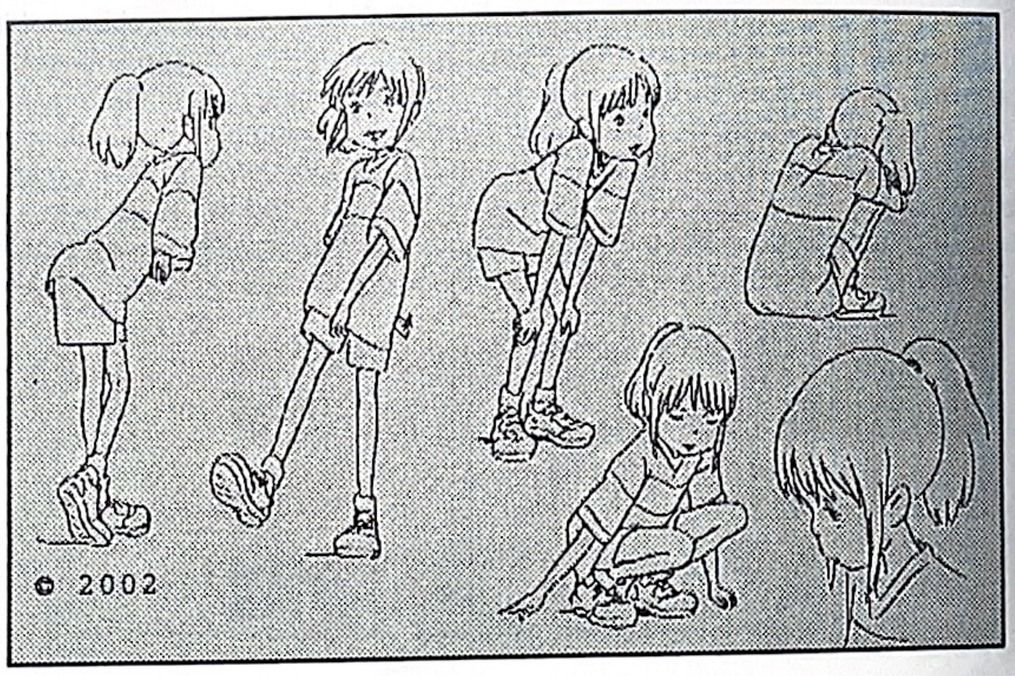
So, how? The first step is to recognize the film for what it is in order to promote it correctly and honestly. Accept the fact that "Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi" is not exactly "Lion King", and therefore should not make unrealistic expectations. Then, determine what is the selling point of the film. The brilliance of Miyazaki films is 1) great story, 2) uncompromising animation, and 3) visual sensation. Next, decide how to promote: It should be treated the same way they treat other foreign or independent films. I really think Miramax had a good strategy when it came to releasing it. Select a few choice art house theaters in cosmopolitan areas, and run it tight. They should STAY LONG – reduce the number of theaters, but just stay long - to encourage enough word of mouth. Target publications for film, art, and media that cater to slightly offbeat material, and run reviews and comments as well as influential major periodicals. Take full advantage of Internet announcements far in advance (www.nausicaa.net is a good start) to drum up the anticipation. And why not try introducing various Ghibli goods as tie-in? Don't they know how much those huge Totoro plush toys can bring in? (Dam, I want them!) Unlike others, Miyazaki does not always rely on famous actors because he rather wants the animated characters and backgrounds to play center role for storytelling. However, the reasons above mentioned, it will be prudent to find a recognizable actor with great voice acting skills, matching character image, AND one who still can perform under the limitation of ADR. There is no need to push up the release during summer season; we can wait until the fall when, traditionally, 'art' films are likely to come out (especially when Disney has its own summer blockbuster 3-D film!) Should the film be edited to make it more American friendly? Well, some foreign films such as "Life Is Beautiful" demonstrated the practice could be extremely beneficial, and Miramax actually discussed their desire to do so when negotiating "Princess Mononoke" with Ghibli. To my relief, eventually the film was released in original form. It might not be the greatest commercial decision, however it gained many spectacular reviews and also, I believe, contributed to change at least some of people's attitude toward the 'cartoon movie'.

An exceptional film, regardless of the theme or genre, stirs your emotions in many ways. You feel elated, fulfilled and confident, or humble, disgusted and vulnerable. "Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi" is such a film that you come out of the theater reflecting on what you just saw. I sincerely hope its release in North America will be a great success and able to showcase one of the highest points of animation art.



EVENTS

Come hear about Chris's experiences directing the first major studio release of a 3D computer animated feature made entirely on the East Coast.

ASIFA-East presents...
Sub-Zero Hero Director Chris Wedge
speaks about the making of
Blue Sky/20th Century Fox's
ICE AGE

April 9th. School of Visual Arts
209 E. 23rd Street
3rd Floor Amphitheater
7 PM

an evening with

emily hubley

Women In Animation NY is pleased to host a special night with award-winning filmmaker Emily Hubley, whose unique animation was recently featured in the film-version of HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH. Hubley will screen several of her short films, including PIGEON WITHIN, which premiered at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival and won the Best Animation Award at the USA Film Festival.

Wednesday, April 17th at 7:30 pm
The Gene Stavis Theater at SVA
209 E. 23rd Street, Room 502
-please bring photo ID-

free event!

presented by
Women In Animation NY

Please RSVP by April 10th
Call 718-599-5423 or e-mail
fiftyfootgirl@yahoo.com

artwork by Emily Hubley from PIGEON WITHIN (2000)

Upcoming Bill Plympton Events:

April 17
Bill Plympton signing
"Mutant Aliens" graphic novel
Jim Hanley's Universe
4 West 33rd St., 5-7 pm
212-268-7088

April 19
Bill Plympton DVD signing
"Plymptoons", "The Tune", and
"I Married a Strange Person"
Kim's Video
6 St. Mark's Place, 4-5 pm
212-505-0311

April 19
"Mutant Aliens"
Theatrical Premiere
party + exhibition to follow
Cinema Village
22 East 12th St.
212-924-3363
one week only!

For more info:
www.mutantaliensmovie.com

FLAMINGO BOOGIES AND LOST CITYSCAPES:
Celebrating the Films of **Richard Protovin**
Curated and Introduced by John Canemaker
Thursday, May 9th - 6:00 p.m. - Donnell Film Library 20 W. 53rd St.

Richard Protovin (1945 - 1991) was a painter who spent fifteen years of his brief life creating animated paintings. His work includes a dozen short films made independently, and a collaboration on three more with his companion, photographer Franklin Backus. The films are a quintessential representation of the period and place in which they were made: the brief but exciting flowering of independent animation in the 1970s and 80s in New York.
Program: 1. Greetings - Marie Nesthus 2. Introductory remarks - John Canemaker
3. FLAMINGO BOOGY (1974) - video 4. STRAW PIB (1979) - video
5. BLUE RIVER (1981) - video 6. FAN FILM (1985) - film
7. MANHATTAN QUARTET (1983) - film 8. SOUTHERN IMAGES (1984) - film
9. BATTERY FILM (1985) - film 10. Interview with Richard Protovin excerpt) (1986) - video

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